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REED IRVINE

KAL 007 media miscue

A six-column headline across the top of Page A14 of *The Washington Post* of June 19 proclaimed: "Article in Britain Links Ill-Fated Flight to Intelligence Mission."

The lead paragraph read: "An article in a British defense magazine strongly suggests that the Korean Air Lines jet shot down by Soviet fighter pilots last September was part of a coordinated U.S. intelligence plan, involving spy satellites and the space shuttle, to gather data on Russian air defenses."

The article in question had appeared in a small-circulation British magazine, *Defense Attache*. It appeared under the pseudonym, P.Q. Mann, whose qualifications were not provided. *The Post's* story reported that the author had made heavy use of an article published in *Pravda* on Sept. 20, 1983, by Marshal of Aviation Pyotr Kirsanov, "laying out the Soviet version" of the shooting down of Korean Air Lines Flight 007.

"Mann" went back 20 years, citing two cases in 1964 when two U.S. Air Force planes were shot down when they intruded into Soviet-bloc airspace. He claimed that these intrusions occurred just as an American spy satellite was orbiting over the area. He concluded that the intrusions were deliberately carried out to activate air defense activity that could be monitored by the satellite. "Mann" jumped from

this assumption to the conclusion that something similar had happened Sept. 1, 1983, when KAL 007 flew over the Kamchatka Peninsula and Sakhalin Island.

He said that the U.S. space shuttle had been launched from Cape Canaveral 36 hours before the Soviets shot down KAL 007 and that at the time of the shootdown, the shuttle was in orbit 1,200 to 2,000 miles south of the KAL track. He said that

was "amply close to involve the shuttle in its (military) command, control, and communications role in the conducting of the extended intelligence operation." In other words, "Mann" was arguing that the space shuttle was serving as a spy satellite, monitoring the Soviet air defenses activated when the Korean passenger airliner flew over Soviet territory. He embroidered this fanciful scenario further by suggesting that the RC-135 Air Force reconnaissance plane that had briefly been in the same area that night was there to fool the Soviets into thinking that the KAL 007 was military aircraft.

The Washington Post noted that Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger had called this article a repetition "of the total set of lies that the Soviet Union published" after the KAL massacre. But that didn't stop it from dignifying the story with 33 column-inches of its space.

The New York Times, on the other hand, ignored the story, as did ABC and CBS. NBC mentioned it briefly. Some papers around the country carried wire-service stories about it. Taxpayer-supported *National Public Radio* gave it big play, running a lengthy interview of the author, without disclosing his true identity.

The same day the story ran in *The Washington Post*, the Associated Press took the trouble to check with a space expert, Jim Oberg of the Johnson Space Center. Mr. Oberg was quoted as saying: "The story is so basically flawed that there is no way anyone familiar with the shuttle would give it a second's credibility. . . . One can never say the story is a plant, but it's consistent with a Soviet campaign to smear the space shuttle. The level of propaganda is increasing. It has doubled and redoubled in recent months."

Mr. Oberg said: "Basic laws of nature and geography show that the shuttle could not have participated in any scenario that resulted in the downing of the Korean jet." He pointed out that the shuttle's orbit carried it no farther north than the southern tier of states in the United States. He said this would have kept it far out of radio or radar contact with any aircraft flying as far north as KAL 007.

Mr. Oberg said the story was similar to Soviet propaganda charges attacking the shuttle as being military. He said: "They say the things that the shuttle plans to do are things for which they shot down other aircraft." He thought this was ominous, since the Soviets do have the capability of shooting down the shuttle.

The Washington Post did not publish the AP story on Jim Oberg's expert comments.

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